

A Letter to the Disillusioned
By Brandalism

A LETTER TO THE DISILLUSIONED

It's 9pm, Monday evening. You're working away on a briefing for a product or service you care close to nothing about. You just want to go home. You sigh and roll back on your chair, looking across the room at your colleagues. "All this creative energy, this intellectual thought and these communicative skills, for what?", you wonder. But only so briefly: the work is due 'by the end of play'. A life in advertising is, literally, a life in advertising. It subsumes your whole being. You have little time or energy left to think about the qualms of our world, let alone the role advertising plays in them.

So how did you end up here?

We all had different dreams. Some always wanted to be in the advertising industry, others wanted to become artists, writers, performers, philosophers. What we had in common was a desire to create work that matters and affects people positively. Along the way, coincidence, necessity, or other people's suggestions to 'get real' or 'grow up' have transformed that dream into a mere shadow of its former self. The bonuses and awards never really suffice to keep your engine fuelled.

But no one talks about this. Many advertising professionals have reached out to us before: “I’ve gotten in trouble for speaking about moral issues”, “to be mildly sceptical or critical is taboo”, “the industry exists in a moral vacuum”. So, attempts at ‘changing it from the inside’, however promising and comforting as a lifelong personal strategy, never seem to truly reach the utopian lands we hoped they would. Sometimes we’re afraid to actually pursue them, scared to lose our jobs; other times they are simply not taken seriously, or they are scrapped at the budgeting table. External voices, too, never seem to ever travel very far. The filter bubble exists, online and offline. Our colleagues and friends work ‘in media’, our families are proud, and critical writings do not appear in our newsfeeds. As experts whose job it is to change human behaviour, we live surprisingly closed-off from any external questioning.

Hello there,

I'm writing this email because I want more. I want more not just for myself but out of this life and this world we live in. I'm working for a advertising agency that supports high profile, multi million dollar clients; helping them become even more powerful than they already are.

I got into this business thinking advertising was this necessary evil that was also able to take the power and reputation of well known brands and use that power to help the greater good. Now being in in the industry and actually seeing the inner workings of an agency I quickly lost hope in this greedy and competitive environment.

Despite the simplifying binary incitement to ‘switch sides’—we, writing to you from the Brandalism collective, appreciate that there are obviously more than just two ‘sides’ to the advertising debate and a multitude of positions to take up. So, do not consider this letter an attack on you, or on the life you’ve chosen to live. Instead, see it as a balancing out, a demand for an opening up to difference. We are, along with the wider world, knocking on the secured gates of your walls.

We are here to steer your skills, creativity and passion away from outdated worlds. Your work could mean so much more. We need more art directors, copy writers, strategic planners, graphic designers, 3D artists, developers and project managers. We need all of you. But, this not a battle against desire. We want more from life, not less. This is then a scream from the edgelands of advertising. A chilling one perhaps, but equally, so we hope, a motivating and inspiring one. So scream back. Many others have before you. Is it going to be an easy journey? No. Is it going to be worthwhile?

You bet.

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FOUR STORIES OF SWITCHING SIDES

you.
includes

Thomas, ex-strategist, Saatchi & Saatchi

I remember very well the day my unpaid internship ended and my official role as a junior planner at Saatchi & Saatchi was announced. I was euphoric. How could I not be? It marked the end of months of free labour and the entrance into the world I had dreamt of participating in for as long as I can remember. Hell, I even moved countries, left friends and family behind, to make it here. This was the start of something beautiful.

There's a second day I remember as vividly: the breaking-point. For a long time, I was living what felt like a double life. In the evenings, I'd be reading critiques of consumer society; during the day I'd be co-producing that same consumer society. There was some strange satisfaction, a certain smugness, that came with being an outside insider and an inside outsider. But then I read one more book, a small one called *Malfeasance* by the philosopher Michel Serres – a book about environmental and mental pollution – exactly at the time when I was briefed on a campaign for an SUV vehicle. It made me realise I had been dazed by the industry. That hardly-expressible feeling that was always latently present since one of the first months I started finally became formulated: the dream-image cracked, and the force that came with it was unstoppable.

I then remember a third moment, which took place about 4 months later. I was sitting in a coffee shop in front of my Planning Director. Of course he had seen it coming: the decreased motivation, the unnecessary cynical comments, and then, the unusual request to have a chat, ideally somewhere outside of the agency, where no colleagues could hear us. 'I wish I had done the same at your age', he responded. While most were, not everyone was as sympathetic to my departure. Not because they'd miss me or my impact in the agency (I'd be replaced within a week or two anyway, probably by someone better at the job), but because they felt attacked by my open declaration of why I was leaving. When a colleague, someone we can actually relate to, rather than an outsider, expresses doubt, we're not entirely sure how to respond. Moral debates never really see the light inside ad agencies.

I had saved up a bit of money to fund my naïve decision to go travelling, 'to figure it all out'. I didn't at all figure out what to do next. What I did figure out, however, was that I didn't want to go back or work as a marketer for charities. The bureaucratic institutionalisation of the latter was counter-productive, and it all still felt too similar. Because my love had always been with thinking and writing – which brought me to strategic planning in the first place – I applied to go back into academia where I would start a full-funded PhD into political practices, allowing me to finally liaise my professional occupation with my personal beliefs.

Sure my friends and family were initially shocked. Sure my income is lower, and my dinners out fewer, but my contentment and sense of self-development, those have multiplied disproportionately. In the end, I'm happy I went there, caught a glimpse of it while meeting a range of so many interesting, skilful people. Perhaps otherwise I would have always wondered what it would be like to work in the industry, and maybe forever falling for its dream-like image, forever lacking something.

Anonymous, ex-planner, AMV BBDO and Fallon

My doubts about my chosen career started pretty soon after I joined the AMV graduate scheme. In a particularly poignant memory, my first boss responded to an early outbreak of ideals by giving me a copy of Fukuyama's 'The End of History', and told me that this was just the way things were - people are consumers, exposed on average to 3000 messages a day telling them so, and my job is to cut through that and make sure my clients' messages land best. I was part of the system, and I needed to deal with it.

I stayed in adland for nearly a decade, and there were a number of other moments when the flame inside me risked turning down, when the internal story I had to believe in order to live with myself, about the limits to my power and about human nature, took a turn for the worse. I remember a Christmas strategy meeting with a major retailer, at which, working through a list, we came to the £1 Christmas tree. 'You can almost smell the exploitation', said one person at the table, at which everyone - me included - laughed, if a little uncomfortably.

In the end, I wasn't brave or strong enough to leap heroically. I shuffled out, making space for myself by taking a part time Masters (now the Ashridge Masters in Sustainability and Responsibility, which I cannot recommend highly enough), going down to four days a week, and pitching strategy projects on the edges of the day job to clients I could pretend I was luring for my agency, but in which I was actually seeking roles for myself. Ultimately, off the back of one such project, I went to work in the External Affairs team of a major UK charity, and finally found space to breathe.

I've now set up my own organisation, and still work with the skills of commercial creativity. Many of the people I work with, and many of those who I would most like to work with again, are friends from agency days. We use the same techniques - creative thinking, the power of ideas, and strategic communication - but devote their use to inspiring people to see themselves as creative participants in society not just as consumers of products and services. I do not necessarily believe everyone in advertising should desert the industry; but I do believe the cult of the consumer, of which people in advertising by default become the priesthood, must end.



Hannah, ex global account manager, a WPP agency

So there I was, flying to meetings in different countries, working with people from across the world and going to fancy restaurants with clients. I was living a dream life. But something was always, almost imperceptibly, off-key. It had been like that from the beginning, but things grew increasingly out-of-sync until, after almost ten years, I could finally say it aloud: I had enough with the unnecessarily long work hours, a general sense of being under-stimulated and, most importantly, the diffuse feeling of being lived. I felt consumed by the lifestyle, the pressure, the apparent sense of meaninglessness.

Looking back now, I feel like I can best describe this process with a quote by Hannah Arendt, who wrote in her 'Men in Dark Times' that "the very humanity of man loses its vitality to the extent that he abstains from thinking". Or, in other words, the less you think, the less you are alive. Fortunately, I decided to let myself be guided by the desire to know more and understand things on a deeper level, which ultimately drove me back into studying again, first part-time and then eventually switching to the academic side full time. Cutting the strings wasn't easy for many reasons and took me approximately 3 years from the fully-formulated wish to leave the industry to actually moving on for good. As Arendt put it further: "Thinking calls not only for intelligence and profundity but above all for courage."

Today, I have to live off roughly 16k per year (essentially less than half of what I was earning working in an agency) in addition to 25k of debt, which I had to take on for my studies - figures that sounds extremely daunting, or, quite frankly, fucking scary. At the same time, I feel like I'm finally taking ownership of my actions and responsibilities as a being on this planet, as a human in our global society. I know it will be hard but have no doubt whatsoever that choosing to think and thus to truly be alive was the best decision I have ever made.

Mark, ex-copywriter, freelance

The lure of the advertising industry can be irresistible – all that money, all those free drinks, all those beautiful people, and those huge white receptions that make you feel like you're entering heaven every day.

And the chance to make all those 'films', 'art', 'poetry', 'prose' with huge budgets and a ridiculous amount of manpower. It's like it's too good to be true. And of course it is. There's a reason you're drugged with money and the feeling that your creativity is valid in itself. It's to numb you and distract you from the fact that 90% of what you do every day is perpetuate the awful capitalist system - to consume and consume with no thought for the poorest or future generations. And to help obscenely wealthy people at the top earn millions every year while those in the same office, but at the bottom of the pile, get the bare minimum the agency can get away with.

You're essentially there to feed into the general public's anxieties - that they need things, aren't doing things right, don't look right, need to fit with the right lifestyle. Sure 10% of the time you'll be doing charitable or ethically acceptable work – but let's face it, this is the absolute minimum that these over fed, over paid ad agencies can get away with doing.

I've been there and done that, and for years it felt great. Then I grew up a bit, grew a bit more conscious, and realised I was helping perpetuate a system I didn't agree with.

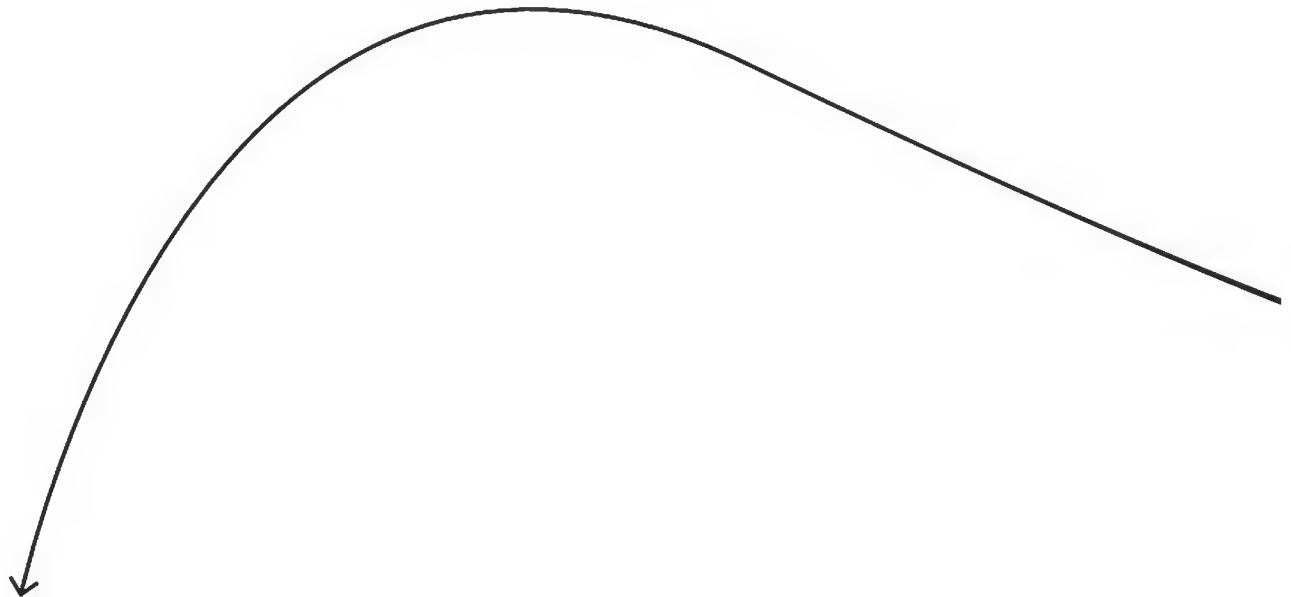
I worked freelance, so whenever I had days or weeks with no advertising work, I wouldn't fret, instead I'd let my mind wander, and see where it took me. I'd go for coffees with friends and kick ideas about, I'd do some gardening, I'd go for a bike ride, but most importantly just let myself wander and escape from the routine of money/task/deadline doing something I didn't love. I guess it was about discovering what I liked doing, instead of just being led by money and deadlines. It was about re-sensitising after years of numbness. I tried to follow my heart instead of the money. I went on adventures, I was spontaneous, I grabbed opportunities, I took risks, but most importantly I didn't worry about where the next advertising job was coming from. I had escaped the vortex.

Sure enough it eventually led to me hanging out with people I liked, who had a shared outlook on the world, that wasn't led by money, consuming, brand names. People who had a disdain for a lot of authority and who could see that 'success' isn't about being wealthy. Once surrounded with people who shared my values, it wasn't long before I was volunteering to help out for free, which led to paid work - a fraction of the pay I was on before - but more than compensated by the buzz of finally being true to myself and my beliefs.

5 STEPS TOWARDS



You might by now be thinking: “Sure, this is all well and good, but how do I actually ‘switch sides’?” The journey may come across as a daunting and overwhelming one. It is only by splitting the journey into a few graspable steps, that we can debunk some of the most common myths that are stopping you from sailing out.





SWITCHING SIDES

1 TAKE THE FIRST STEP

It is time to rid yourself of the understandable desire to stick with comfortable uncomfortableness. The first step towards this is openly admitting to yourself you want to get out.

Make notes of why you want to get out and what is stopping you. Recognise the moments of revelation, and those of embarrassment. Are there moments in the agency when your moral compass is tested and the judgement becomes unbearable? Do you feel awkward talking about your job at non-agency parties? Do you feel a sense of revolt or contempt when looking at your boss? Write all of these down, because there will be moments when people challenge you, or when you start doubting yourself. In the beginning at least, you'll need constant reminders of the validity of your doubts. Soon you'll become very aware that you don't have to be there at all.

There are a few fears that may stop you from getting out. We can be afraid of criticism. We are told that we should be grateful for having such great jobs, that we paid a high cost for a particular education, and that changing careers at the age of 26, 38, or 54 is a form of failure. But why follow the advice of someone who thinks persistence-despite-discontent and wealth-despite-moral-dubiousness are desirable and to be celebrated?

Here is a bit of straightforward advice: ignore cynics. Why does your choice matter to them? Why do they care? This is where it becomes interesting. Often those who are most cynical or critical are those who are afraid that you might actually succeed in following your desires. They are afraid because your successful departure would show that their own excuses are invalid. It would remind them of their own incapacity to change.



There's also fear of the unknown, of new social networks, new ways of thinking new kinds of intentions.

But consider it this way: in practice, you risk more by staying put and continuing to be disillusioned than by following your desires and moving away towards new places. And we are afraid that we might fail. But it is through careful planning and moving step-by-step that you're most likely to experience success. And ultimately, even if it does not work out, you've tried; and you will have grown in terms of skills, social networks and personal development. If need be, there's always a way back. There's no 'failure' in any of this.

**2 GET INVOLVED
DON'T JUST ANALYSE**

You may wake up in the middle of the night, trying to think your way through the problems you are facing, and hoping to come up with the perfect route out. But over-analysis can paralyse, and analysis is no substitute for action.

It is primarily through small steps of experimentation that paths open up and that you'll be able to start formulating answers to two essential questions: which field do I want to be active in? And which role do I want to occupy in this field? Most of us don't have just one issue we are passionate about. We often care simultaneously about many at the same time – homelessness, gender inequality, climate change, war atrocities and corporate corruption. Become interested in different subject matters – read and increase your knowledge. By reading around a few subjects, you can get to grips with what really motivates you and it will also help you to decide what kind of organisation or practice you want to get involved with.

Beyond reading, get actively involved. This means reaching out to existing individuals, collectives or institutions already active in one of your fields of interest. Don't just think about NGO's. There's also community groups, grassroots movements, academic research circles, political designers and film makers, activist collectives, artists, campaigning groups and political publishers. You could reach out to different people (via email, at public meetings, events, fundraisers), offer them ideas, tell them why you want to get involved, and why you think your skills may be useful to them (and they will be). Yes, your first bits of involvement are sure to be pro-bono. But they're essential: they help you decide what you do and don't want to do, while opening you up to new social networks, different types of potential jobs and new ways of working. It's through persistence that the greatest of opportunities will arise, including paid ones.

For all of this, there is no need to wait for 'the right moment', let alone to run into your boss's office screaming "I QUIT!". Despite the short-term appeal of procrastination, it is better to start straight taway. To make the most of your spare time, you'll have to guard it vigorously from your employers and friends. All of this is essential because the more you are capable of using your spare time productively, the more you will be able to lay the ground for your actual departure, all while you're still enjoying the security of your steady income. This is where your vague dreams of contributing to a better world start taking shape. It may take months, but in the end, once you're starting to find your place in this new landscape, you'll feel confident to make the actual jump towards either a part-time or full-time departure.

3 *MAKING A LIVING*

The trickiest of all. It is time to think about how long you think you need to 'experiment' part-time or full-time within one or more of the roles you previously explored. This is where financial planning comes into play.

The best place to start is with this simple rule: the more money earned, the more spent. Make a realistic overview of how much money you earn, how much you spend, and how much you actually need. What can you cut down on and what can you sell? What is the minimum you can live on? You'll be surprised.

It is important, at this stage, to set a realistic overview in advance of how many months you can give yourself to experiment before looking for full-time employment again in your previous role. In short, address your financial situation closely, but don't let money fears stop you from moving away. Consider your move away as a financial investment rather than a sacrifice. It costs money and it will pay off, perhaps not in straightforwardly financial terms, but on a multitude of other levels. The moral alignment of your personal self and your professional self can be one of our greatest achievements in life.

Yet of course, we all need an income to survive long-term. There are different ways to approach this. You can stay part-time in your current role in advertising, while pursuing pro-bono opportunities as a freelancer that may turn into paid ones. Another option is to aim for full-time employment within existing creative organisations that have a strong social and environmental track record. Or you can create your own opportunities: do you have a good idea that could get you funding from the public sector or a grant giving organisation? Today's issues are complex, with numerous factors affecting each of them. This means change can come from a range of approaches: from legal interventions, awareness raising through social media, building power in your local community or creating positive alternatives for our food, transport and financial systems.



Those with a family often wonder, “Am I selfish for deciding to leave the industry and my steady income?” While the question is valid, the answer is an emphatic *no!* The way to approach it, then, is to talk about it with your friends and family outside of the advertising industry. If you ensure a decent financial plan, no one is actually in a position to stop you from making the departure. Quite the opposite, they might consider their dad/mum/sibling/son/daughter is on a process of renewal towards a social life not drained of creativity or moral standing. If you’re unhappy in your job – you’re unlikely to be the satisfied individual they would love you to be. This is of as much benefit to them as it is to you (and broader society).

4 SET OUT A PLAN

Setting out a plan can help your fear of failing to dissipate.

Unless you are fortunate enough to immediately find satisfactory full-time employment, you'll need to set out, in detail: how long exactly you want to, and can realistically dedicate time to, a not-yet-fully-paid role; how much longer you need to spend in your current role to be able to spend enough time away from it after your departure; what the steps are you're going to have to undertake to maximise your chances; which groups you will need to align yourself with; and where you hope to get to, both short-term and long-term.

5 EMBARK ON THE JOURNEY

Don't consider this plan a perfect blueprint for your future. The beauty of all this is that you can adjust the journey as you go along. Your desires will grow along the way, and your ideas will start falling into place, sometimes in unexpected yet exciting ways. What once felt like an extravagant fantasy – the topic of a late-night, hushed conversation in the office – finally comes into clear sight and becomes graspable, waiting for you to reach out.

We'll see you on the other side?

